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Her Artless Way

FELICITY NELMES

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*“You need to start taking this more seriously,
your mashed potatoes are f...ing bland...”*

- Gordon Ramsay

"Frightfully florid. He says that I'm '*frightfully florid*'."

"I am so sorry babe. Who the hell does he think he is?"

Wade flapped the paper a few times to straighten out the creases and started reading the passage over again aloud:

"Sunte's *Autumn Leaves* is, while in matters pertaining to movement initially rather pleasing, far too colourful to be tasteful, its frightfully florid nature distracting from its true purpose. The purpose of the painting is, as a result, nigh on undiscernible and therefore truly anyone's guess."

"Well, at least he didn't say that you're 'odiously ostentatious'." His mother-in-law laughed from the kitchen, though it wasn't enough to make Wade grin. His wife placed her hands on his forearm, and frowned sympathetically. He lifted his coffee mug towards his lips, but interrupted himself:

"And look at this," he gestured with the mug, "He says that I'm 'in danger of cutting short a promising career with kitschy, attention seeking art.'"

And he gestured once more before folding the paper up and forcefully setting his mug on top of it, spilling coffee which the paper soaked up in a soggy ring around the cup's base.

"I don't see why you should care so much about what that idiot Frank Blevins thinks. I don't think your art's kitschy at all, and I don't think your career's about to be cut short either. *Autumn Leaves* is very beautiful, and I'm entitled to believe that, whatever Blevins says."

"Are you finished with your breakfast dear? I'm washing up." Said her mother over the sink.

"I just can't believe that he would write such a thing about the exhibition, or that the paper would publish it. This was important, Tess. I really don't know what to say," he said to his wife as she shook her head.

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I was thinking about the review I had written on *Autumn Leaves* as Wade's coffee went cold on the other side of Seattle.

"Yes Mr. Teek, I understand what you're saying. Look, no, no I know. Just listen for a sec..." I battled over the phone with my editor. He was a man who not only lacked the training and skill necessary to appreciate art, but also a sensitivity and a sensibility to understand it.

"Who cares if Lacing wrote a contradictory critique on Sunte's work? The important thing is that the *Times* published *mine*. And anyway-"

"Mr. Blevins?" My secretary called from the doorway.

"What is it Karen, I'm on the phone," I said, holding my hand over the end of the telephone.

"You've been invited to a party tonight, Mr. Blevins, although I'm not sure it's not a last minute attempt to make up the numbers... the invitation's from a Mr. Carey Yetts, from the *Times* sir."

"Thank you Karen." I resumed my phone call: "And anyway, what does *Lacing* know about *art*?"

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"It's, well it's not *bad*, Blevins, it's just a little..."

"It's banal. And pretentious."

We had organised the meeting earlier on the phone, as I had been asked to review some paintings at the James Harris Gallery as part of an exhibition featuring emerging artists. We stood now in front of a particularly tiresome painting. The way it hovered off-white against the bleached white of the wall jarred, though it didn't jar in that striking way which is so significant in modern art. It was neither large nor small, yet somehow one felt upon looking at it that it took up more space than it was entitled to. Seventeen red spots were painted carelessly, or possibly with great care, evenly across its surface, little drips bleeding out of some of them. In texture they were patchy, like in the way that a child applies paint, and some lined up and some didn't.

"Pretentious?" Teek asked.

"Pretentious. I mean, surely you can see what's wrong here. He's trying ever so hard to be original and stimulating, and in trying too hard he falls short. Trying to be deep and emotionally profound and all he's done is slobber all over what it means to be art," I said.

"I do see what you mean. But you can't be too critical."

I didn't say anything to that.

"I'll write my critique on the weekend, Teek, when I've had some time. I wish I could review some *real* art some time, not these pointless messes. Anyway, I'll send you the draft Sunday afternoon."

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In the evening I went to the party.

"Gosh, how clumsy of me. I am so so so so sorry. You know, I'm usually so terribly graceful. I'm a ballerina you know, I spent five years at Colorado Dance Academy..." And in an artless way she mopped up the champagne she had spilt on me with the edge of her dress.

"My name's Maxine," she said, her face just a little too close to mine.

"Of course it is," I said, not bothering to check myself. But she just laughed this laugh which fell somewhere between abattoir and Christmas carol, tossing back her head like a second-rate actress. As she did this part of her heavy faux-diamond neckless caught on her hair and tugged one of her curls loosely out of place. It suited her.

"Really, it's just me being clumsy. Which as a rule, I'm not. I've only had a couple so far. Three. Four? Three." She stopped with the dress and pulled a lipstick out of her bag. She peered into the barrel of the stick as she twisted out the colour, which she then applied liberally without breaking eye-contact with me. It was untasteful red.

"Did you see that painting out the front? Apparently he bought it very recently. He's a bit of a collector. I think it's very beautiful, don't you?" and she smiled thoughtfully as she recalled the

painting, and something about her expression made me agree that I did, though I had actually thought it tedious when I'd seen it earlier.

She took from a passing tray two more champagnes and as she passed me my replacement. My hand wiped some of the clouded perspiration off the side of the glass and water gathered where our hands met like cold sweat. She apologised again.

"It's fine, really... Maxine."

I took a sip from the champagne. "It's not very good anyway." I smiled.

She laughed that laugh again and then paused pensively.

"I'm sorry, I don't think I caught your name?"

"Bl-"

"Blevins!" cried Mr. Yetts as he approached us, his wife on his arm.

"Mr. Yetts."

"I am so glad you made it. Read your piece in my paper this morning. I quite agree. Florid is the only word for it."

"And what you said about his career, about it being cut short? I think you're right. I liked his earlier works better," his wife said, both hands around his arm, craning her neck so that it hovered over his shoulder.

"Don't interrupt, Julie... She's quite right. It seems he's getting carried away, getting ahead of himself."

We all paused thoughtfully.

"Maxine, I've heard all about the ballet next Saturday. My wife and I will be absolutely thrilled to be there. Mr. Blevins, Maxine is a most wonderful ballerina. No, no, really you are. And she's performing in Mendelssohn's *A Midsummer's Night Dream* at the 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue."

Maxine nodded and stole a sip of her champagne. As she swallowed she said, "We're on tour at the moment, though honestly, Seattle's been a little bit of a drag." And laughed.

Mr. Yetts and Julie smiled politely, but said nothing.

We all paused thoughtfully again.

"You really should come with us, Mr. Blevins, it will be a wonderful night. We don't see enough of you," said Mrs. Yetts.

"Just a moment, Julie. My wife is quite right. Come dine with us before hand and then we'll all enjoy the ballet together."

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And so, a week and a half later, I went to the ballet. I had expected her to be Titania or Helena or Hermia, though as it turns out she was fairy no. 9. All the lesser fairies, of which she was one, ran onto the stage at the start of the very first act: *The Dream*. They wore sparkling, pallid purple dresses which flowered as they moved through the watery light on the stage. They were all dressed uniformly, but Maxine somehow maintained her essence as on the night that I had met her, and it struck me that the endless faux-pas of her manner flattered her just as well on stage as it did in life. All of the ballerinas had their hair pasted up into dense buns on top of their heads, the tension pulling up their cheeks and lips into sturdy, tight porcelain smiles. She had no other smile, her happiness just looked like that. And, in genuinely smiling, it was beyond her control that her natural face should look so fake.

The ballet was long, and Mendelssohn's melodies were beginning to grind on me. Fifty two crescendos in and without showing signs of wrapping up, it compelled my mind to wander. 'Frightfully florid.... kitschy, attention seeking art... '

Autumn Leaves began to smear itself around the walls of my mind, its untasteful colours dripping, intruding upon the wrinkly crevices of my brain. And it's true, their movement was initially pleasing.

Calming, in an absurd way. They wept themselves down the underside of my eyelids, stickily gluing my eyes shut. Paired with Mendelssohn's music, their childish hues somehow developed an ironic maturity. Like sweet sherry, they evolved on the pallet of my mind through stages of complexity; now they were the reds of hot flushes and early valentines, then the pinks of summery tea cakes and warm velvet in the evenings.

"The purpose of the painting is... nigh on undiscernible..." and what is the purpose of discerning the meaning of art? Need *Art* have an ulterior purpose in need of discerning other than that it is, by some miraculous feat of human sensitivity, Art?

And yet the colours *were* florid, and they *were* untasteful.

And so was she.

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I had hoped to see Maxine after the ballet, but of course that was unrealistic. I got her number off Yetts and called her up and we met in a cafe some days later.

"I'm not sure I would have understood what was happening if I hadn't read the play."

"Well at least you've read the play. I know that I should have by now, but *Shakespeare*." She pulled a face and we both laughed.

"You know Frank - can I call you Frank? I never asked what it is that you do."

"What I do?"

"Yes, what you *do*. You know, the career which you chose to validate your existence with?" She said it to be funny, but I could only force a smile.

"Oh, I'm a free-lance art critic." I shifted around in my chair and swivelled my coffee cup in its saucer a few times as I said it to give myself something to look at that wasn't her face. Somehow what she'd said made me feel uncomfortable.



"That must be terribly wonderful. I love art, though obviously I don't know as much about it as you do."

I almost said, "You're probably right," but I had a strange sense that saying so would be somehow untrue.

"I don't know about that. The most important thing is simply knowing, or rather feeling, what's beautiful."

She blushed a little as I said it, which made me smile.

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The draft for Teek was twelve days overdue, and I still couldn't write the review. I avoided struggling with it until I was forced to struggle with it, and then I avoided struggling with it some more. I stared at a photograph of the painting until its red dots were burned into my retinas, until they swam about in the thin waters of my eyes. It still looked banal to me. Only now, I found it very difficult to say so. My thoughts turned endlessly to the off-white of the paint and of Maxine's skin, and it occurred to me that the red of the dots were exactly the same as that of her lipstick on the night of the party, which didn't distract me so much as made me feel a strange kind of affection for the painting. Like her, it seemed acutely false. And yet it was this very quality which somehow made me feel defensive of it.

"Mr. Blevins?" Karen stood in the door way and looked at me sympathetically. "What is it, Karen?" I sighed.

"Mr. Teek has come to see you. He wants to talk about your review."

"Right. Well show him in."

Teek did not look at me sympathetically.

"I've already called you about this - "

"Twice."

"Twice, and I haven't had as much as an adjective out of you about the painting. Well what is it Blevins?

You had enough to say about it at the gallery."

"Banal and pretentious and try-hard... well I don't know Teek. Is it?"

"Well I don't know either Blevins, you're the bloody art critic here, not me."

I didn't say anything. I thought of Maxine again, of her synthetic diamonds and her curling-iron hair, and of her grating laugh and smile. And yet it was all her. Her falsity was such an integral part of her that it seemed to me that she was no longer, by definition, false. There was something beautiful in that.

Teek softened his expression a little as he sat down in a chair across the desk from me.

"I'm sorry Frank. But you've got to give me *something*."

I massaged my scrunched up eyes with my fingers and then with my thumbs pressed into my jaw I lifted my fingers off of my face in an 'it-is-what-it-is' gesture.

"This isn't like you. You've never been one to reserve your criticisms before... You haven't been bribed, have you?" and I smiled at his joke because I thought it would please him.

"So tell me. Why haven't you written anything?"

"Well what would you have me write? That it's boring and jarring and frankly pointless?"

"Well if that's what it is..."

"I don't know. I feel... well it makes me feel hypocritical."

"What?"

"Never mind. I..." And I struggled to articulate what it was that I meant to say. That a latent yet growing discomfort caused by the jagged edge of hypocrisy had stunned me with doubt into apprehension, and like the leaky red of the dots my self-confidence had trickled out of me. Even though it was only a painting. Much in the same way that she was only a woman. Only a woman and only a painting.

"I don't know." I said.

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